

“Indians Are Not Mascots”: Using Critical Race Theory to  
Examine the Documentary *In Whose Honor*

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## Introduction

“What part of ‘ouch’ don’t you understand?” asked Durango Mendoza, a Native American Illinois resident. Mendoza is speaking to the University of Illinois and their mascot Chief Illiniwek. Chief Illiniwek has been the mascot of the University of Illinois since the 1926 and remained so until 2007 with the support of university students, trustees, faculty and alumni. What the university failed to acknowledge all those years was the offensiveness and demeaning nature of using a fictitious Native American chief as a sports mascot.

This essay will explore Jay Rosenstein’s documentary *In Whose Honor*, a story examining racism in the sports world. The film follows the journey of a Spokane Indian woman, Charlene Teters, and her transition from University of Illinois grad student to the leader in a national Native American movement. The film shows the lengths the University went through to keep their mascot, while Teters fought to protect the culture and identity of her people.

In examining *In Whose Honor* I will apply the Critical Race Theory approach to reveal racist practices still prevalent in today’s society. Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a rhetorical approach aims to study and describe race and racism. It argues that racism is deeply engrained in today’s society. In its inception CRT was developed as a law theory. It involves the relationship between race, racism and the official power in our legal systems. Additionally, CRT can be used as a tool to help overcome such dominating and oppressing social structures by highlighting these racist practices so engrained in our culture.

Following the section describing Critical Race Theory, I will give a brief description of Native American history to reveal the oppression they faced. Native Americans have suffered centuries of discrimination that continues today in the form of sports mascots. In the History of Native American Oppression section I aim to highlight the injustices Native Americans have faced as a precursor to the oppression they endure in today's society.

In the bulk of my essay I'll describe the film in rich detail as it examines the use of Native American symbols in sports. The essay will conclude with a section of my evaluation and a discussion the impacts of these practices. By using Native American symbols as entertainment we are degrading and diminishing Native American culture and identity. This essay applies Critical Race Theory to the documentary *In Whose Honor* to highlight the normalization of racism as the images of Native Americans and their culture are used for entertainment in sports.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory was first conceived in the mid-1970s after impacts from the Civil War seemed to be reversing. Law professors Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman were noticing stalls and setbacks in the efforts made after the Civil War. In response they created a new approach to analyze and tackle the "subtle, institutional, or color-blind forms of racism and a judiciary that no longer seemed eager to champion civil rights" (Delgado p.1). CRT grew out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a leftist movement also working to challenge and ultimately overturn certain accepted norms in law and legal practice. The CLS movement lacked the strong voice and platform of racial inclusion that

CRT provided. Even though CRT origins date back to the 1970's, the majority of its scholarship and organization took place a few decades later (Delgado).

The CRT movement truly began in 1989 with a workshop in Madison, Wisconsin, attended by 30 law scholars of color. Among them was Richard Delgado, who is often associated with the theory. In the years to follow, Delgado and colleagues held public conferences and workshops designing different aspects and themes of the theory. The next step was producing a reader, which Delgado helped author. Today CRT is the subject of a few dozen books and hundreds of law-review articles and essays (Milner IV 2008; Bowman, Bernier, and Rocco 2014).

### *Tenets*

Critical Race Theory's aim is to highlight the normalization of racism in American society in order to transform the oppressiveness of our culture. CRT has a number of basic tenets, but for our purposes we will touch on six. The first tenet argues racism is so embedded in our society that it has become unnoticeable. Racism has become ordinary and part of the structures of our culture. Beyond the legal system racism is also encoded in popular culture. We can find it in language, music, movies, and even clothes (Litowitz). This 'embedded racism' is apparent in the social structures of Japan. Wajin (indigenous Japanese people) serve as the majority group in Japan as opposed to Non-Wajin (present day Japanese, nineteenth century colonizers). Non-Wajins are systemically disenfranchised and discriminated against in Japan. "People who fall into the Non-Wajin category in Japanese society will perpetually be made self-conscious for being 'different', set apart from 'normal' society as 'special', and vulnerable to being treated differently, even adversely, with insufficient legal protection from unequal

treatment” (Arudou p.163). The mistreatment of Non-Wajins is so common in Japan that it has become embedded into their social structures.

The second tenet states that racial differences are socially constructed, as there is no biological distinction. Aside from small features like hair and skin color we all share 99% of the same genes. This means our traits, such as intelligence or personality, are not affected by race. Racial categorization is deeply embedded in our history and culture. We as humans need to categorize the world, and as such we have wrongly categorized different races based on physical differences. For example, the Jim Crow laws during the slavery era categorized black as inferior to whites regardless of biological significance (Rocco et al).

The third tenet supports a theory called differential racialization. The idea behind differential racialization is that the majority group benefits from racializing (devaluing) of different minority groups at certain times. The occurrence of differential racialization is based on current events, economic needs, or even geographic location. When first arriving in Indian Territory in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the colonist had economic needs: land. The colonist benefited from taking over land and they racialized Indian Americans in the process (Delgado).

The next tenet involves the idea of interest convergence. Interest convergence says, “racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites” (Milner 333). Milner provides a great example of modern day interest convergence. When schools decide to teach students different languages it gives students the opportunity to

be bi or tri-lingual. Interests converge as this benefits ‘non-English speakers’ while also, more significantly, benefitting Whites by allowing them to become bi-lingual. (Milner)

The fifth tenet combines two different closely related terms. The first one is intersectionality, or when someone has a complex identity (i.e a Latino who is transgender). Intersectionality says that any person with a ‘complex identity’ will be forced to deal with added power struggles and injustices. The second concept is anti-essentialism. Anti-essentialism argues against human tendencies to see certain groups as unitary in identities. One’s identity cannot be reduced to their expected characteristics (Delgado, Stefancic). For example, when you say “all women are sensitive and caring” you are essentializing women. Likewise essentialism claims “you are a women so you must be sensitive and caring” (Philips).

The sixth and final tenet in CRT is about the voice of the oppressed. This tenet says that those in the subordinate group have unique voices and experiences due to current and historical oppression. As such, Whites do not share or understand such stories or experiences. For example, an individual in a minority group will make better race-studies scholars because they see racism and sexism more clearly than the majority (Litowitz).

Critical Race Theory has been applied to many different subjects related and unrelated to legal studies. H. Richard Milner IV at Vanderbilt University uses CRT and interest convergence in particular to analyze and examine the practices and policies in teacher education. Lorenzo Bowman, Judith D. Bernier, and Tonette S. Rocco examine Human Resources Development (HRD) through the lens of CRT. HRD practitioners implement the laws and policies within an organization, which often uphold society’s

inherent racism. Danielle R. Olden uses Critical Race Theory to analyze Denver Colorado's school desegregation in order to "trace the history of racial formation in the post-World War II United States" (Olden 250)

Despite its origins in legal studies CRT can be applied to various subject matters. Critical Race Theory was created in the hopes of changing the oppressive legal system and power structure in US society. All six of these tenets work together to make up and define Critical Race Theory. By examining the tenets of CRT we can now apply the theory to the Native American injustices and oppression presented in the documentary "In Whose Honor".

### **A Brief History of Native American Oppression**

In America we observe a holiday called Christopher Columbus Day. We celebrate Columbus for his historical significance, discovering America. What we as Americans often forget is that America had already been discovered. America was already being inhabited by Native Americans who had been living on that land for as long as 30,000 years. Their ancestors came from Asia by land, sea and ice bridges and filtered into North, Central and South America. When Columbus came to the Americas he did not discover it, he claimed it as conquerable and set the stage for years of oppression, exploitation and, in essence, genocide. While this section is by no means exhaustive, it aims to give a brief history of Native American oppression over the years (Johnson & Hook).



### *'Cruel Savages' Era*

When the Europeans arrived in the Americas they saw the opportunity to own and conquer land overseas. The only thing standing in their ways was the “cruel and vain savages” who inhabited the land. The Europeans portrayed the Native Americans in dramatic and inaccurate ways. Native Americans were described as fighters, cruel to captives, and alcohol dependents. As such Europeans held themselves as superior. Some even viewed themselves as “divinely ordained conquerors”. At the time, nothing would stand in the way of the Manifest Destiny. The Europeans wanted to conquer all (Forbes).

With European arrival came European diseases. The Europeans brought diseases such as typhoid, cholera, yellow fever, smallpox, measles, whooping cough and influenza. These foreign diseases spread through the Native population at alarming rates. Additionally, starting in the 1500's, conquerors like Hernando De Soto and Francisco Velasquez De Coronado invaded regions in present day Mexico, Florida and Alabama. Coronado and Soto led multiple battles against Native American tribes, capturing and killing hundreds of men women and children. European conquerors stopped at nothing to acquire the land they believed they deserved (Weiser).

### *Brutal Battles and Massacres*

In this era the Indian Americans and colonists begin to have full-fledged battles and wars, often resulting in the brutal massacres of Native tribes. In 1637 the Pequot War took place in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Under the command of Captains John Mason and John Underhill English settlers overcame the Native American fighters. They massacred between 600-700 Pequot Indians. Indian Americans, however, succeeded in battle during the Pueblo Rebellion in 1680. Pueblo Indians rebelled against Spanish

colonists in Arizona and Mexico gaining independence for 12 consecutive years (Weiser).

The Chickamauga Wars in the late 1700's was a continuation of the battles between the British and the Cherokee in present day Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Despite the attempts to fight back, the colonists were much more skilled in the art of warfare than the Native Americans. The colonists wiped out entire Native American tribes. "A troop of 50 armed men entered the Workhouse at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and hacked to death the only 14 surviving Conestoga Indians" The remainder of this small tribe had been similarly massacred 13 days prior (Weiser).

#### *Last Major Battle*

In 1890 the famous Wounded Knee battle between U.S. troops and Sioux resulted in the death of some 150 Native Americans. The conflicts all began with the Ghost Dance spiritual movement in which the Sioux believed "that if they practiced the Ghost Dance and rejected the ways of the white man, the gods would create the world anew and destroy all non-believers, including non-Indians" When the U.S. government got news of this movement they attempted to arrest who they believed was a Ghost Dancer. Instead they had captured the Sioux Chief Sitting Bull whom they killed in the attempted arrest. Tensions rose as the Sioux Indian's were forced to mourn the loss of their much-loved Chief. In a preemptive strike a U.S. Army Calvary surrounded a group of Ghost Dancers near Wounded Knee Creek. An individual fight broke out between a Sioux and soldier starting the battle. The Wounded Knee battle was more accurately a brutal massacre. The Calvary killed 150 tribe members, nearly half of which were women and children.

Wounded Knee marks the last of the major battles in America against the Plain Indians (Weiser).

### *Modern Day Oppression*

While the wars dwindled down in the 1900's Native American oppression was still very present. For example, Native Americans have been portrayed inaccurately and negatively in the media. With the growth of the film industry America saw the rise of Hollywood Westerns. These films portrayed adventures and battles between the "Cowboys and Indians". The Indians however were presented as savages and, almost always, the villains. In more recent years Native Americans in films are presented more truthfully. Sadly these films also "represent Indians as a fantastical and romanticized people long gone from the face of the earth"(Wheeler P.1). They fail to acknowledge that Native Americans are still living and still struggling with present day issues (Wheeler).

### **In Whose Honor**

*In Whose Honor*, written and produced by Jay Rosenstein, is a documentary that was aired on PBS in 1997. The documentary was showed as part of PBS's POV series, or Documentaries with a Point of View. *In Whose Honor* is a short independent film running about forty-five minutes long. The documentary contains interviews, clips from protests and sports games, and education on Native American history.

*In Whose Honor* centers around a Spokane Indian woman named Charlene Teters. Teters singlehandedly spearheaded a campaign against the mascot of University of Illinois. Teters was attending the university as a graduate student in the Department of Art when she decided to take her children to a university basketball game. The school's

mascot, a fictitious Indian American named Chief Illiniwek, came out in Indian garb and danced what was believed to be an authentic Native American dance. As chief Illiniwek (a non-Indian student) performed, Teters's children sunk in their seats. Teter's daughter tried to hide as her son attempted to laugh off his obvious embarrassment. Their culture was being publicly mocked and used purely for entertainment value.

It was then that Teters began her fight against the use of Indian names as mascots in sports. She held protests (often by herself) in attempts to explain to people how these mascots are offensive to Native Americans. Teters had no intent to become a major leader in a national movement. Her fight started for her children, to protect them from such hurtful messages. Her fight continued, however, for the nation's Native American population.

While the story focuses mostly on Teter's journey, there are many other key characters. University trustees, alumni, and students are interviewed about their views on Chief Illiniwek. Additionally, the story includes sentiments from other Native American activists, such as Michael Hanney, Vernon Bellecourt and Karen Strong. All of these different characters and aspects of the film worked together to make this meaningful and highly praised documentary.

The film received reviews from multiple newspapers such as *Rockford Register Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*. "Moving" (Emerson) "striking" (Penner) and "powerful" (Johnson) were just a few of the words used to describe the film. Jim Bawden of the *Toronto Star* states "*In Whose Honor* is a well crafted American documentary that looks at Charlene Teters, a Spokane Indian, who's campaign against the mascot of the University of Illinois, Chief Illiniwek, turned into a national debate."

The documentary also won numerous awards including the Broadcast Education Association/ Broadcast Faculty Awards and the National Educational Media Network/ Gold Apple Award.

### **Description and Analysis**

The film opens with a scene from a 1992 basketball game in Williams Arena, Minneapolis. Charlene Teters is chanting, “Indians are not Mascots” in protest. She is struggling to hold her ground as security guards attempt to rip her off the railing and escort her outside. Fans nearby scream at her to “Get outta here!” and let them enjoy the game. They see nothing wrong with using Native American symbols in sports because, as CRT argues, it is so normalized in our society. Her grip on the railing holds firm despite her adversaries, a symbol of the battle she is fighting for Native Americans.

In her interviews Teters solemnly praises her Native American ancestors for their strength and perseverance: “Our people paid with their very lives to keep what little we have left. The fact that we even have anything today speaks to the strength of our ancestors”. She feels it is her job to protect and fight for the rights of Native Americans. Teters confesses that if she had known about what she was about to face, she would have never attended the University of Illinois.

The film jumps to a scene from an average Saturday at a University football home game. Home games at the University of Illinois are about more than just football. They are about business, profits, politics and pleasure. Students, faculty, alumni, and townspeople all gather to support the team, the Fighting Illini. “Everywhere is the symbol of University of Illinois, a fictitious Indian American character called Chief Illiniwek,”

describes the narrator. The film shows us scenes of tire covers, shirts, table clothes, and banners stamped with the face of a Native American in a large red headdress. No one seems to notice that there is something very wrong with these images.

The next scene is of a student dancing across the football field dressed in Native American garb, and a headdress. Univ. of Illinois Trustee Susan Gravenhorst claims: “He draws the community, the student body, the faculty together”. An alum of the university, Rick Winkel, believes the Chief’s performance is “nothing but inspiring”. Chief Illiniwek has been the mascot of the school for over 70 years, and in that time no one stopped to ask how Native Americans feel about that. All that changed in 1989 when Charlene Teters attending a basketball game with her children.

Teters was reluctant about attending a university basketball game so she warned her children beforehand what they would see. What she was not able to warn her children about how they would feel. The chief came out in buckskin, a long feathered headdress, and performed what was considered at the time an authentic Indian dance. Upon seeing the chief Teters’ children sunk in their seats. “I saw my daughter try to become invisible.” Teters explains as she fights back tears. In that moment Teters realized she could no longer be a bystander to what she was witnessing. She needed to address the issue.

Using a fictitious Native American Chief as a mascot in sports can be recognized as cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is defined as the “use of one culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome” (Rogers P. 476). When Native American symbols are used as mascots in sport, it is appropriating their culture. Teters

explains that her “children have been taught to respect the person who has earned the right to wear an eagle feathered headdress”. In her interview Teters talks about what it was like being raised in Spokane, Washington, nearby a reservation. She was taught to have the highest respect for the eagle feathers, the chief, the dance, and the face paint. All those elements were sacred in Teter’s community, and she raised her children with those same values.

Teter’s fight began after that fateful basketball game. She began holding protests on the campus, often alone. She suffered through ridicule and threats from students who disagreed with her cause. One October night in 1989 the current Chief Illiniwek decided to give a talk at the student union about the history and tradition of the chief. As Teters arrives at the event she sees Chief Illiniwek’s headdress being held up like a trophy. When it is Teters moment to talk the media turns their microphones and cameras on her. A frenzy of press ensued, and Teters became the focus of media attention.

The film transitions into a narrative about Chief Illiniwek and his history at the University of Illinois. Upbeat big band music plays while we learn about the evolution of the chief. Chief Illiniwek was created in 1926 merely as a halftime stunt. He garnered such a positive response from students that students continued to pass down the role of the Chief. As years passed the craze with the Chief only escalated. The University landscape was covered in Native American caricatures with stereotypical features like large nose, and ears. In an instant the music becomes somber while the narrator reminds us what else was happening in these times. The film pauses on images of University of Illinois students and TV personalities wearing black faces. Striking similarities are raised

between Chief Illiniwek and extinct racist stereotypes such as Little Black Samba and Frito Bandito.

While Black caricatures are not as prominent in modern American mainstream, Native American ones are still very present. The first tenet of Critical Race Theory is the concept of ‘embedded racism’. Racism is so deeply embedded in our culture that we have become blind to it; it’s invisible. The use of Indian American symbols and characters in sports is a perfect example of ‘embedded racism’. The University of Illinois believes they are honoring Native Americans. Jeff Beckham, who played the chief in 1994 claims: “We keep it very honorable and dignified”. Students and University official’s believe to have the utmost respect for Native Americans. They imagine their mascot’s garb, dance and headdress is honoring and bringing awareness to Native American culture. However, using an entire culture as a mascot for entertainment does not honor them.

The University of Illinois is blind to the fact that it is offensive to take Native American culture and turn it into a mascot. It does not honor them or brings awareness to their culture. Rather it is a mockery and dishonor to Native American customs, dance and clothes. It is disrespectful and demeaning to wear the clothes, or dance the dance of a culture that you do not belong to. These racist acts are so normal in our society that we do not even notice their existence.

In Teter’s Spokane community performing a dance is part of religious ceremony. When a white student performs this Native American dance he is abusing their religion. Teter’s argues that if a Catholic ceremony or a Jewish practice was being distorted in the same way that Chief Illiniwek abuses Native American religion, we would certainly hear about it: “But somehow because it is a Native practice and ceremony and religious items



and practices, it is not respected”. The University of Illinois is blind to the fact that their mascot and his practices are abusive to Native American religion.

In his interview Rick Winkel goes on to say that Chief Illiniwek serves as a remembrance to the Illini tribe and their heritage. What he must not realize is that Chief Illiniwek’s performance has no relation to the Illini tribe. Chief Illiniwek’s costume comes from the Sioux tribe and his dance is made up entirely by the students. This practice does not serve as remembrance to the Illini tribe, but rather perpetuates the idea that all Native American tribes wear the same clothes and performance the same dance.

Anti-essentialism is another tenet of Critical Race Theory. Essentialism is the human tendency to categorize individuals in a group and attribute specific characteristics to everyone in a group. Society has certain images and stereotypes of Native Americans. Chief Illiniwek helps to enforce those stereotypes when he performs an unauthentic dance. Additionally, when Chief Illiniwek wears a costume that belongs to a completely different tribe, it maintains that all Native American tribes dress in the same clothes regardless of tribe. Chief Illiniwek further reduces Native Americans to specific characteristics by claiming he is authentic.

Teters and Dennis Tibbets, American Indian Counselor, explain how the attempt at authenticity is worse than a caricatured Native American. Teters says she would prefer to see the caricatured Native American because you could laugh at it and realize its pure ignorance. The night of the basketball she was expecting to see a clown version of a Native American with big ears and a big nose. When instead she saw a beautiful headdress, her heart sank. An attempt at authenticity only makes it that much harder to breakdown the stereotypes we have created. As Critical Race Theory argues, we are blind

to that fact that Chief Illiniwek presents a stereotypical image of Native Americans and in turns essentializes their culture. When individuals, such as those at the University of Illinois, truly believe they are honoring a culture, convincing them otherwise will not come easy.

Native American activist Michael Haney gives a powerful example of how others suffered from University of Illinois's mascot. University of Illinois was set to play a college in Iowa. Iowa had an aggressive Greek community whose displays of school pride meant bashing the opposing team. Some houses on Greek Row decided to hang Native American dummies from trees. Native American students attending the school had to walk to class and witness these racial slurs, undoubtedly feeling threatened for their lives. Chief Illiniwek's symbol had a much greater effect than the University even realized. This highlights how blind we are to certain acts of racism because of how normalized Native American symbols are in today's society.

By 1990 Teters was no longer holding protests by herself. She had the support of fellow students who joined in her fight against Chief Illiniwek. In retaliation, students in support of Chief Illiniwek began to protest against her. They held signs and American flags while shouting chants such as "pick another school!" and "chief haters have got to go!" Teters started receiving calls from people who wanted her gone. She got death threats and even people sexually harassing her. She stopped answering the phone only to have her children hear these death threats over the answering machine. Their home in Illinois no longer felt like a safe place.

Despite all Teter's efforts, in 1990 the Board of Trustees voted in favor of making Chief Illiniwek the official symbol of the University of Illinois. When Teters left the

University she was able to find a larger number of people who supported her fight. Her protests were starting to take flight when she began tackling the professional football world. In 1992 a protest was held before the Super bowl game between the Buffalo Bills and the Washington Redskins. The turnout was the promising and the event made headlines. Magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and *The Sporting News* began writing articles in support of Native American rights. Schools were even asked to stop using Native American symbols as mascots, and people were actually listening. “Eastern Michigan, Southern Colorado, St. Johns, Marquette, and Bradley University all eventually dropped their Indian references”. Pressure increased for the University of Illinois when three fellow members of the big ten conferences decided to stand up against Native American mascots. The University of Iowa even refused to play any teams that continued to use Native American mascots. In an interview, University of Illinois trustee Tom Lamont states that, “being politically correct to merely appease a minority group of individuals is not an appropriate positions to take. Speaking personally, I don’t care frankly what some would do at those universities, because I’m not sure, again, that they are capable of understanding the environment in which we share and enjoy the Chief”. The University of Illinois remained firm their belief that Chief Illiniwek is not offensive as he is dignified and honorable in nature. Chief Illiniwek and his symbols are a part of the University’s norms, and so they can’t fathom how he could be deemed as anything other than respectful.

Native American and University of Illinois Grad student Karen Strong speaks out on what it is like seeing these symbols. She describes the sadness she feels when she has to see the Chief’s face all over the town. The chief is displayed in the dean’s office, in

barbershops, and in restaurants. These symbols remind her “everyday exactly the genocide of the past”. The Chief serves as this constant reminder to all Native Americans that their culture and existence is still not respected. Native American images are so saturated and embedded in today’s mainstream landscape that we fail to see how impertinent and demeaning they truly are.

A committee was created at the University of Illinois in 1994 to look at ways to make the campus a more inclusive place. The reports revealed that the number one recommendation was to ban the Chief. As promising as that news appeared to be, there was a huge backlash from University Alumni. Each year Alumni provide millions of dollars for scholarships, programs, and new buildings. The Alumni were some of the biggest supporters of the Chief, so when word got out that the Chief might be banned from campus they were not happy. Some Alumni even threatened to stop donating to the University unless the Chief remained on campus. As a result the inclusivity committee was advised to drop their recommendation to ban the chief. Appeasing the Alumni became more important than fighting for the rights of Native Americans.

University Alumnus and State Representative Rick Winkel decided to take the recommendation to keep the chief one step further. He proposed a bill to make Chief Illiniwek the official symbol of Illinois. The film concludes with a scene from the courtroom where Rick Winkel’s bill was passed. The Governor of Illinois later vetoed the bill stating it was “bad government”. Chief Illiniwek, however, remained the University’s mascot until 2007 when it was finally deemed “an offensive use of American Indian imagery”(Klatell).

## Evaluation and Impacts

The use of Native American symbols in sports is bigger than just the University of Illinois. Still today the Washington NFL team is known as the Redskins. Ward Churchill writes a stimulating and sarcastic essay called “Crimes Against Humanity”, in which he discusses the issue of the names of professional sports teams. Much controversy exists in regards to names of such teams as the Cleveland “Indians”, Washington “Redskins” and Kansas City “Chiefs”. Churchill theorizes what the sports world would be like if we continued to “honor” other ethnicities just as sports teams do currently. Churchill claims we need a NFL team called the “Niggers” whose halftime activities involved people “garbed in leopard skins and wearing fake bones in their noses”. Churchill goes on and assigns many more derogatory terms to ethnicities for team names and mascots. To “honor” the Hispanics Churchill proposes there be a San Diego “Spics” team or a Galveston “Greasers” team. Clearly Churchill is being satirical; however, teams like the “Redskins” truly believe they are honoring American Indians (Churchill).

In Joseph J. Hemmer’s article called “Exploitation of American Indian Symbols: A First Amendment Analysis” he talks about the use of American Indian symbols in sports. Hemmer explains how using American Indian symbols is demeaning and can inevitably result in loss of self-esteem. Moreover, such symbols “denies American Indians the right of self-definitions”(Hemmer p.126). American Indians are being stripped of their identity as society uses their symbols for enjoyment practices. Hemmer contends that continuing to ‘honor’ American Indians with symbol use only furthers the white

culture as the dominant culture. Trustees, alumni and students at the University rationalize Chief Illiniwek by stating his practices “honor Native Americans”. Hemmer contends, “it is impossible to honor someone who does not feel honored”(Hemmer p.127). Using Native American symbols is not an encouraging and compassionate practice, but rather a racist and demeaning practice. In fact, suicide rate are said to be three times higher for Native Americans than for the general public (Hemmer). If this doesn't display how damaging the use of American Indian symbols can be, I'm not sure what will.

When we use Native American images and symbols as mascots it does not honor their culture. In truth it is stealing their culture and using it in a way that is disrespectful and depreciating. Chief Illiniwek comes out onto the field to perform a dance that does not belong to him. He has no right to that dance because he does not belong to that culture. The Chief also wears a beautiful feathered headdress, although he has not earned such a right. That student is wearing a headdress as a costume. More than that he is essentially mocking Native American culture.

Students, faculty, trustees, and alumni see their representation of the Chief as an exception to all the other Native American sports mascots. They are not the exception. No one is the exception because taking a culture and its symbols and turning it into a stunt before a game is disrespectful on every level. The University of Illinois and all other Native American mascots are taking Native American clothes and learning a Native dance solely for the purpose of getting people riled up for a game.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have used Critical Race Theory to examine Jay Rosenstein's documentary *In Whose Honor*. The film is a powerful look at the hugely popular imagery of Native American mascots in sports. Chief Illiniwek has been a long-standing tradition at the University of Illinois. When a Spokane Indian woman by the name of Charlene Teters saw the Chief in all his glory one October evening in 1989 everything changed for the University. Teters began holding protests and speaking out against the Chief in the efforts to make people realize the wrongness of turning a culture into a mascot. These racist practices are so embedded in the University's culture, as Critical Race Theory reveals, that they have been normalized. When she realized she couldn't continue to fight against an entire community that stood behind Chief Illiniwek, Teters moved on to bigger and better things. She took her protests to the world of professional sports. She started a movement that continues even today for the removal of Native American characters and symbol in sports.

While many schools in the United States have removed any and all Native American references, there is still much work to be done in professional sports. The Washington Redskins have refused to change their names despite being one of the most offensive terms used for Native Americans. Teter's started this movement, but it is our job to continue in her fight. You can help to change Washington's offensive name by visiting [changethemascot.org](http://changethemascot.org). Click on the section called "Take Action" to learn about all the different ways you can help. In 1992 Charlene shouted in protest, "Indians are not mascots". The year is 2015 and these worlds still need to be heard and said.

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